

Noah Gets Drunk

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

After the flood, Noah plants a vineyard (Genesis Chapter 9.20). He makes wine, gets drunk and ends up naked on the floor of his tent. His grandson Canaan sees him and runs to tell his father and uncles. They do not want to see their father naked and so they take a sheet between two and walk backwards until they have covered him. When Noah wakes "he realizes what Canaan has done to him." We are not told what he did. The Midrash suggests a range of salacious possibilities, from rape to castration. Either way Noah curses Canaan. Later, in the Torah, Abraham's nephew Lot, too, will get drunk and commit incest with his daughters.

On one level this narrative hints as to why the Canaanite tribes were regarded as corrupt and dispossessed by the Israelites. They were sexually corrupt. But on another level, it tells us of the dangers of alcohol. Whereas the Torah insists on using wine as part of religious ceremonial, it also warns of the dangers of getting drunk.

Sigmund Freud accused Moses of being a killjoy. But Moses allowed alcohol. He just knew its risks and limitations. The Torah wants us to enjoy life but to be aware of what can happen if we do not exercise discretion.

We see in our times how much alcohol is responsible for sexual crimes, particularly at colleges. I suggest it is because if kids are forbidden to drink alcohol, when they do get a chance, they go overboard. But if as in most Jewish families, one is allowed alcohol in moderation and under defined conditions, drunkenness is less prevalent. Similarly, if you are careful with whom you drink. You will be more likely to avoid bad company and less likely to be seduced away from Jewish life.